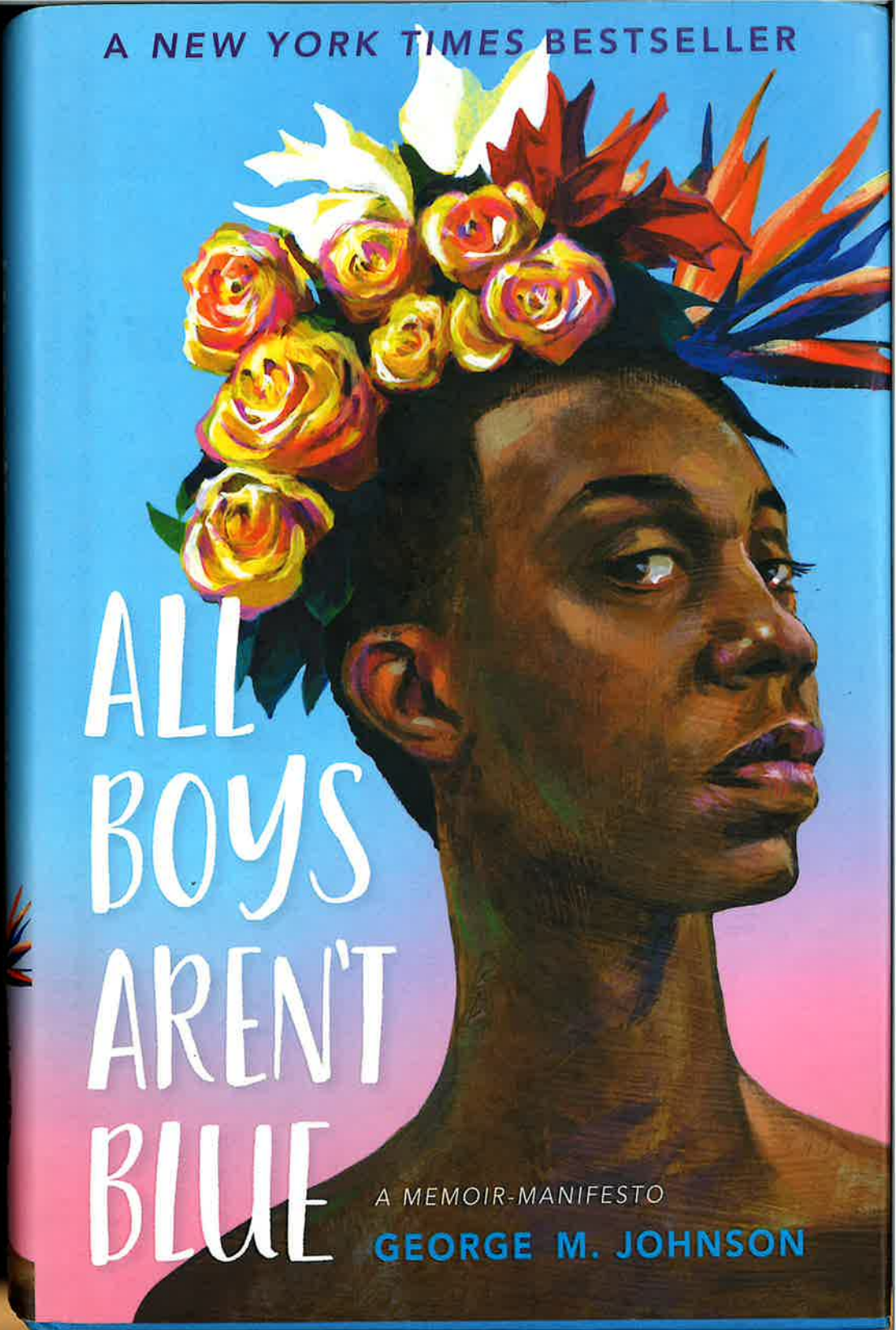


A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER




# ALL BOYS AREN'T BLUE

A MEMOIR-MANIFESTO

GEORGE M. JOHNSON

10  
Jordan  
Wiggins

*[Handwritten signature]*



# ALL BOYS AREN'T BLUE

A MEMOIR-MANIFESTO  
**GEORGE M. JOHNSON**

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX  
New York





Chapter 13: Setting Myself Free or Setting Myself Up? .....	224
---	-----

#### Act 4: Friends

Chapter 14: Caught in a Haze .....	243
Chapter 15: Losing My Virginity Twice .....	262
Chapter 16: Don't Know Why I Didn't Call .....	277
Afterword: All Boys Aren't Blue .....	293
Acknowledgments .....	301

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In writing this book, I wanted to be as authentic and truthful about my experience as possible. I wanted my story to be told in totality: the good, the bad, and the things I was always too afraid to talk about publicly. This meant going to places and discussing some subjects that are often kept away from teens for fear of them being “too heavy.”

But the truth of the matter is, these things happened to me when I was a child, teenager, and young adult. So as heavy as these subjects may be, it is necessary that they are not only told, but also read by

teens who may have to navigate many of these same experiences in their own lives.

This book will touch on sexual assault (including molestation), loss of virginity, homophobia, racism, and anti-Blackness. These discussions at times may be a bit graphic, but nonetheless they are experiences that many reading this book will encounter or have already encountered. And I want those readers to be seen and heard in these pages.

Within these pages, the word *nigger* or *nigga* appears, sometimes in full and sometimes abbreviated as n\*\*\*\*. The same is true for *fag* and *faggot*, and their abbreviations. I included these slurs in the text in specific ways for specific emotional and intellectual effect. Please use the same thoughtfulness when talking about this book. If you don't identify as Black, African American, or queer, don't use these slurs in full, which can be harmful to others. You can use common abbreviations, like *n-word* or *f-word* instead.

Please know that this book was crafted with care and love, but most importantly to give a voice to so many from marginalized communities whose experiences have not yet been captured between the pages of a book.

I hope this book will make you laugh at moments. I hope this book will make you cry at moments. I hope this book will open you up to understanding the people you may have never spoken to because of their differences from you. We are not as different as you think, and all our stories matter and deserve to be celebrated and told.

With love,



George M. Johnson

## INTRODUCTION

# BLACK. QUEER. HERE.



Baby George with Great-Grandmother Lula Mae

The story of how I entered the world was a foreshadowing.

When my aunt first saw my head full of beautiful, jet-black, curly hair crown from my mother's womb, she ran into the hospital's hallway where my family waited.

"It's a girl! It's a girl!" she yelled, to my grandmother's excitement and to my father's *slight* disappointment. But by the time my aunt got back to the

delivery room, and I had been fully born, she realized her quick assumption would soon need correcting.

She ran back out to the family and said, "Uhh, actually, it's a boy."

The "It's a girl! No, it's a boy!" mix-up is funny on paper, but not quite so hilarious in real life, especially when the star of that story struggles with their identity. Gender is one of the biggest projections placed onto children at birth, despite families having no idea how the baby will truly turn out. In our society, a person's sex is based on their genitalia. That decision is then used to assume a person's gender as boy or girl, rather than a spectrum of identities that the child should be determining for themselves.

Nowadays, we are assigning gender even before birth. We have become socially conditioned to participate in the gendering of children at the earliest possible moment—whenever a sonogram can identify its genitalia. Gender-reveal parties have become a trendy way to celebrate the child's fate, steering them down a life of masculine or feminine ideals before ever meeting them. It's as if the more visible LGBTQIA+ people become, the harder the heterosexual community attempts to apply new norms. I think the majority fear

becoming the minority, and so they will do anything and everything to protect their power.

I often wonder what this world would look like if people were simply told, *You are having a baby with a penis or a vagina or other genitalia*. Look up *intersex* if you're confused about "other." What if parents were also given instructions to nurture their baby by paying attention to what the child naturally gravitates toward and to simply feed those interests? What if parents let their child explore their own gender instead of pushing them down one of the only two roads society tells us exist?

When our gender is assigned at birth, we are also assigned responsibilities to grow and maneuver through life based on the simple checking off of those boxes. Male. Female. Black. White. Straight. Gay. Kids who don't fit the perfect boxes are often left asking themselves what the truth is:

Am I a girl?

Am I a boy?

Am I both?

Am I neither?

As a child, I struggled mightily with these questions. And that struggle continued to show up in



various ways throughout my life. Now, as an adult, I have a much better grasp of sexuality, gender, and the way society pressures us to conform to what has been the norm. I understand how this sense of normality doesn't hold a space for those of us who don't fit the aesthetic of what a boy or girl *should* be, or how a man or woman *should* perform.

Unfortunately, we are still struggling to move the conversation past an assumed identity at birth. And LGBTQAP+ people are not just fighting for the right to self-identify and be accepted in a society that is predominantly composed of two genders—which would be the bare minimum of acceptance. We are also fighting to survive physical acts of violence. Many of us are not even surviving that. The spectrum of our traumas can be as broad as our identities.

I started writing this book with the intention that every chapter would end with solutions for all the uncomfortable or confusing life circumstances I experienced as a gay Black child in America. I quickly learned this book would be about so much more. About the overlap of my identities and the importance of sharing how those intersections create my privilege and my oppression.

Many of us carry burdens from the traumas of our past, and they manifest in our adulthood. We all go through stages of accepting or struggling with our various identities—gay, straight, or non-identifying. And race and various other factors play a role in how we navigate them. Many of us are always in a state of working through something—always in a state of “becoming” a more aware version of self.

This book is an exploration of two of my identities—Black and queer—and how I became aware of their intersections within myself and in society. How I've learned that neither of those identities can be contained within a simple box, and that I enter the room as both of them despite the spaces and environments I must navigate. In the white community, I am seen as a Black man first—but that doesn't negate the queer identity that will still face discrimination. In the Black community, where I more often find myself, it is not the Black male identity that gets questioned immediately. It is that intersection with queerness that is used to reduce my Blackness and the overall image of Black men.

Because this is a memoir, I'm sharing some of my personal memories with you. These memories are

specific to my experience as a kid, teen, and young adult. But they also underline some of the universal experiences of Black and/or queer people. My struggles are that of Black men and queer men and people who exist at the intersection of both identities. That's where the manifesto part comes in. I believe that the dominant society establishes an idea of what "normal" is simply to suppress differences, which means that any of us who fall outside of their "normal" will eventually be oppressed. In each chapter of this book, I'll tell you memories of my experiences growing up and what I think they mean in a larger context of living as a Black queer person.

I grew up hearing the word *nigga*, which was a term of endearment in my home. It's become a term of endearment in many Black families. By the time I was in middle school, I was using the word regularly with friends. It was the thing to do as a thirteen-year-old—that is, to curse and use the *n-word*. We were all doing it. It was how we greeted one another, how we clowned one another. We had different tones and inflections that could tell you the way the word was being used. But never with the "-er" at the end.

We knew saying that word with the hard "-er" meant something different.

By high school, I stopped using it. Surrounded by whiteness, I wasn't going to dare let my classmates get comfortable using that word with or around me. Anytime a white student even tried to utter it, I checked them. White kids love to test Black kids on things like that. Certain Black kids were fighting so hard to fit in, they would let white kids steal that part of our culture just so they could pretend they were accepted in white society.

By college, I was back in a predominantly Black school—back to using the *n-word* again with my new friends. It was just like middle school, except as an adult I knew I could use it, and no one could say anything to me about it. Truth be told, most professors hated that we used the word. They were of the opinion that the word had too much hatred in it for us to ever be able to take back full ownership, in any variation.

The *n-word* was the last word heard by many of my ancestors when they were being beaten and shackled—forced into enslavement in a new land. It was the last word heard by my people when they



were lynched as a spectacle for white people. "Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees," as the great Nina Simone would sing. So, for many of my professors who grew up during Jim Crow, experiencing legalized segregation, there was no reason to be proud of that word.

It was during those years in college and right after college that the NAACP and the National Action Network decided that it was time for the Black community to "bury the n-word." There was this belief that if we stopped using it, the word itself would lose its power.

This brought out arguments on both sides, people for and against this action to destroy a word that is so tied to the most painful parts of history in America. I began to shift to the side that thought it was best to bury it. At that time, I was learning how to be "a respectable negro"—with the good grades and a college degree, attempting to fit into white society, wherein I felt I deserved to be treated as an equal. It was important to me that I didn't use that word, because I felt it made us less than.

I felt that our using that word was a bad thing—because white people cringed when we said it. Because certain Black people cringed when we said it. To me,

it just didn't make sense to keep using it, especially because it remained controversial. I did what I always did with most things I didn't want to deal with—buried it. I wasn't just trying to bury the n-word though. In burying the n-word, I was also burying my queerness. If I couldn't see parts of my own Blackness as respectable, there was no way I was ready to see my queerness as respectable either. But now I know that queerness is a part of Blackness, and that there is no Blackness without queer people.

Then, early in 2012, Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman—and my entire perspective shifted on being a Black person in this society. I saw that the new-age civil rights movement was being led by people who looked like me. People who were fighting for me and other Black children. It was during this time that my unlearning process really began.

My eyes were opened by seeing the shooting of Black people at the hands of police. Seeing the killing of Black children like Tamir Rice at the hands of police. Seeing that it didn't matter whether you were an affluent Black, a poor Black, a child, or an adult. In the eyes of society, I was still a n\*\*\*\*r. And my love for my Blackness meant that I had every right to fight

for my people and every right to take back ownership of that word.

So, I started using the n-word again. I understand now that my Blackness is self-defined and that to use the n-word or not use the n-word is my choice. But it shouldn't be based on the comfort of those who constantly seek to invalidate me. I understand now that there is no such thing as "a respectable negro" in the eyes of society, nor was I ever made to be one.

BLACK.

My second identity—queer—is a journey that I will be on until the day I die, and I honestly believe that. Every day I learn something about myself. I get to sit and look back at all the times my queerness displayed itself, both in ways known to me and unknown to me.

As a child, I always knew I was different. I didn't know what that meant at the time, but I now know it was okay to be that different kid. That being different didn't mean something was wrong with me, but that something was wrong with my cultural environment, which forced me to live my life as something I wasn't. The fact that I couldn't see my full self in Black heroes or the history books was more about the

changing of history to spare white guilt than it ever was about me knowing the whole truth.

I learned that kids who saw me as different didn't have an issue until society taught them to see my differences as a threat. Those differences, like being effeminate and sassy, were constantly under attack my entire childhood from kids who didn't even know why I needed to be shamed for those differences. It wasn't them shaming me as much as it was those raising them who taught them to shame others with those qualities. Most kids aren't inherently mean. Their parents, however, can make them mean.

By the time I reached middle school and high school, suppression was my only option. I had become even more of a minority in the population, and I had to deal with the intersection of Blackness and queerness—and the double oppression that generates—for the first time ever. Fighting for Blackness in a white space came naturally to me, though, and I did it every chance I got. Fighting for my queerness, however, never seemed to be a viable or safe option.

I lived in that isolation for all those years in high school. I only saw snippets of queer representation in small television roles. They were rarely played by

people who looked like me. But it was never to the extent that I ever gained the confidence to be that person. Thankfully, college opened my eyes to true reflections of myself—in literature, in art, in class beside me—not early on, but right on time. I realized that the things I had always been running from had never left my side. That the things I had been chasing were all just a myth to turn me into something, someone I didn't want to be.

In college, I took a risk and did something that was so far away from being queer that it should've put me even deeper in the closet: I joined a fraternity. I was trying to preserve an image of masculinity for myself—something that Black fraternities have run on for years. However, in finding the frat, I found myself. I found brothers with a common experience chasing the same thing. And instead of the universe giving us what *we* thought we wanted, it gave us what we actually needed.

It gave us unconditional love and brotherhood from a shared queer experience. It gave me brothers who could see my humanity outside of my queerness. It gave me the confidence to define my Blackness and my queerness and my manhood and my masculinity, or lack thereof. I got to live in my totality and, for the

first time ever, exist as both Black and queer in the same space and be loved for it, not shamed.

## QUEER.

I want the words of my life story to be immortalized. I want to immortalize this narrative of joy and pain, this narrative of triumph and tragedy, this narrative of the Black queer experience that has been erased from the history books. An existence that has been here forever.

I've never thought about immortality before. I always assumed that my mortality would be linked to my inability to survive as a Black queer person. I have the deaths of so many people who look like me in mind. From the HIV epidemic, to domestic violence, to suicide, I watch people like me who don't survive the oppression. They become today's news and yesterday's headlines.

I remember being nervous about writing a book like this. I wasn't sure if this was my story to tell. In writing this, though, I realized that I wasn't just telling my story. I was telling the story of millions of queer people who never got a chance to tell theirs. This book became less about having the answers to everything,



because I haven't been through everything. It became less about being a guide and more about being the gateway for more people to find their truth and find their power to live in that truth.

I often think about a statement Viola Davis made when she won her first Oscar. Something along the lines of encouraging people to go to the graveyard and dig up all the dead bodies in order to hear and tell the stories of those whose dreams were never realized. Those are the stories she's interested in telling. Although that is valid, I must challenge it. This book is proof positive that you don't need to go to the graveyard to find us.

Many of us are still here. Still living and waiting for our stories to be told—to tell them ourselves. We are the living that have always been here but have been erased. We are the sons and brothers, daughters and sisters, and others that never get a chance to see ourselves nor to raise our voices to ears that need to hear them.

Toni Morrison states in my favorite quote of all time, "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

This is the story of George Matthew Johnson. This is a story for us all.